Light from Other Minds

Eugene Goodheart

Published online: 3 May 2011
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2011

Political pundits may be the most powerful force in our political culture. The dictionary tells us that the pundit is somebody with knowledge and wisdom. It is also cognate with, perhaps derived from pandit, the Indian word for a Brahman who is an expert in Hindu culture, law and philosophy. In contemporary America, the word has been stretched almost beyond recognition of its original meaning. Pundits may have the pulse of public opinion, but they rarely display wisdom in judging it. Since they are credited as experts, the “ordinary citizen” tends to take what they say as political wisdom. What a properly functioning democracy requires is a citizenry educated in the *complexity* of political reality. Instead of providing that education, pundits tend to replicate the ideological certainties of the parties or report the opposing views without evaluating them. The result is chatter rather than thoughtful reflection. The compression of the short article or sound bite is anathema to complexity.

It is the mark of an educated citizen that he acknowledges the limits of his knowledge, especially of subjects, in which he has no training. In a field such as economics, populated by so many variables, the probability of the truth of any claim does not begin to approach that of the natural sciences. (The phrase “*political* economy” is enough to caution against seeing it as a [natural] science.) Those who are experts in the field may disagree among themselves, so coming up against the limitations of his or her own knowledge the citizen may decide in favor of one side or another for ideological reasons or from a genuine sense that one side is more convincing than the other—ideally, with

an awareness that a view or a policy that issues from the view may be mistaken or misdirected, requiring a change of direction. Ideally, a leader must combine conviction of what ought to be done with an open-minded awareness of unintended consequences. The model for change is *experiment*, which allows for failure. The experimental attitude should trump ideology. The scientist for whom experiment is a way of life has a built in tolerance for failure as well as desire for success. Failure may in fact be productive of future success when it points the way to another road to be taken. In contrast, the politician, who needs success in order to survive, cannot afford failure. Moreover, whether a particular policy or program succeeds cannot be measured with the precision with which one measures it in science.

Acknowledging the limitations or partiality of our understanding should lead to a willingness to receive, in John Stuart Mill’s phrase, “light from other minds” (Himmelfarb, 92). Mill wrote a pair of essays on his mentor Jeremy Bentham, a liberal and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a conservative, vividly exemplifying the phrase. Without disowning Bentham, he exposes the narrowness as well as the value of Bentham’s teaching. In the companion essay on Coleridge, Mill, the liberal, enters into the mind of the conservative Coleridge in order to receive light from it. What he finds of value is his method of suspending judgment of an established institution or opinion in order to discover its meaning. The pursuit of meaning does not exclude the question of whether it is true or good or useful; it only postpones it. In discovering the meaning or purpose of an institution or tradition, one can then judge its abiding value fairly. The method is an implicit rebuke to the premature radical impulse to dismiss long-standing institutions that seem to thwart progress. We should try to understand why they came into being and the human needs they satisfy before passing judgment. Mill follows Coleridge’s method in the

E. Goodheart (✉)
Department of English, Brandeis University,
Waltham, MA 02454, USA
e-mail: goodhear@brandeis.edu

patience and generosity in which he traces Coleridge's thought. His exposition is in fact so generous that it may lead a reader to wonder whether Mill is undergoing a conversion. In *The Future of Liberalism*, Alan Wolfe finds fault with Mill for bending over backward in his appreciation of Coleridge's conservative political philosophy at the expense of the man who had guided him in his intellectual and political upbringing. Wolfe fails to take into account the mental crisis that Mill suffered, resulting, in his view, from the emotional impoverishment of his Utilitarian upbringing. His response to Coleridge then is a form of self-criticism, a realization of the inadequacy of Benthamite rationalism as a guide for living. In *The Vital Center*, the liberal Arthur Schlesinger Jr. reenacts Mill's openness to adversary views when he asserts that "we have strayed too far from the insights of Burke and de Maistre, we have forgotten that constitutions work only as they reflect any actual sense of community" (241). The conclusion of Mill's essay expresses the hope that "by systematiz[ing] and rationaliz[ing] their own creed, conservatives will be led to adopt one liberal opinion after another, as part of conservatism itself." Has Mill disappointed expectation? One would expect that his engagement with Coleridge would open him up to conservative ideas and sentiments and allow for a revision of liberalism itself, perhaps a synthesis of what is best in liberalism and conservatism. Instead he tries to appropriate whatever he finds of value in conservatism to the liberal cause. What Mill, I believe, wanted to signal is the need to preserve one's convictions in the very act of being open to adversary ideas.

Solomon Asch in effect echoes Mill in *Social Psychology* (1952): "The clash of views generates events of far reaching importance. I am induced to take up a particular standpoint, to view my action as another views it...Now I have within me two standpoints, my own and that of the other; both are now part of my way of thinking. In this way the limitations of my individual way of thinking are transcended by including the thoughts of others. I am now open" (131–32). Similarly, the philosopher John Rawls writes in *The Theory of Justice*: "In everyday life the exchange of opinion with others checks our partiality and widens our perspective; we are made to see things from the standpoint of others and the limits of our vision are brought home to us...The benefits from discussion lie in the fact that even representative legislators are limited in knowledge and the ability to reason. No one of them knows everything the others know, or can make the same inferences that they can draw in concert. Discussion is a way of combining information and enlarging the range of arguments" (358–59).

Those locked into ideologically extreme positions tend to read and listen to one side of the argument. Interested only in their own voices, ideologues prove incapable of hearing the voices of those views that differ from their own, or if they hear those voices, it is only for the purpose of

overcoming them. Viewing the arguments on the other side through the refractory lens of their own ideology, they find either bad faith or intellectual failure on the other side. Living in an intellectual ghetto fosters frustration, anger, impatience and resentment, which can only be overcome by defeat of the adversary. The other side has its ideologues in turn experiencing frustration, anger etc. that can be assuaged only by victory. Receiving "light from other minds" and the cooperative effort that might follow from it assumes both the good faith of those minds and their capacity for productive thought. Ideology is not the only obstacle to fruitful intellectual change. Politics, the "art" of self-interest, defines and redefines programs and policies in the interests of gaining and remaining in power.

It is a bad sign when mantras replace thought. The conservative mantra is "lower taxes and decrease spending," a solution to all problems of the economy; it provokes liberal economists such as Paul Krugman to treat it with disdain. I am not an economist, but his *arguments* for increasing spending in a time of economic crisis, if not his manner, seem persuasive to me. Which doesn't mean that all conservative views of the economy should be rejected out of hand by liberals. Debt and deficits, a concern of conservatives, have their good faith and bad faith proponents. While inveighing against deficits, bad faith proponents view tax cuts for the wealthy as sacrosanct. Good faith proponents, such as David Stockman, Reagan's former budget director, would discontinue the Bush tax cuts across the board, for the middle class as well as the wealthy. In the current polarized situation, liberals and conservatives need to take serious arguments seriously whatever their source. Taking arguments seriously does not necessarily mean agreeing with them.

No philosopher has been more eloquent on the subject of the need for principled compromise in the political life than Mill. In his *Autobiography* he refers to "the difficulties of moving bodies of men, the necessities of compromise, the art of sacrificing the non-essential to preserve the essential." He speaks of "'seesaw' writing alternately on both sides of every question, and he congratulates himself on being "much superior to most of my contemporaries in willingness and ability to learn from everybody...As I have shown in my political writings that I was aware of the weak points in democratic opinions, some Conservatives, it seems, had not without hopes of finding me an opponent of democracy: as I was able to see the conservative side of the question, they presume that, like them, I could not see any other side" (218). So the question arises: what does it do to the side that you are on and are not prepared to abandon to be able to see the world from the other side? This is not a problem for the novelist or the dramatist (Shakespeare is the supreme instance) possessed of what Keats called Negative Capability ("when man is capable of being in uncertainties,

Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reading after fact and reason”), but it is a problem for the political thinker and even more so for the political actor who needs to be decisive and take a stand. Mill, inspired by the example of Tocqueville, did advocate views that did not conform to liberal democratic ideology, for instance, the idea of proportional representation, which would guarantee the rights of minorities against majoritarian tyranny, because it would remedy a weakness in democracy. Does this diminish his liberalism? It depends on how one understands the term. “Liberal” suggests something beyond ideology: a generous openness to other and even adversarial views as in its academic setting, a modifier of Arts and Sciences. Politics, to be sure, is not a course in political philosophy. It is not simply an academic debating society. Interests and power that inform these interests determine and resist outcomes. But politics is also thought and speech, and what counts as persuasive and true in intellectual life is not or should not be irrelevant to the political life.

The counterpart to Mill on the “conservative” side (a designation *faute de mieux* that inadequately characterizes him) is the aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, whose mistrust of egalitarianism is qualified by an extraordinary understanding and appreciation of American democracy. As a critic of equality and a champion of liberty, he was nevertheless sensitive to the way the defense of liberty could be a mask for privilege. The aristocrat views his liberty as threatened by the underclass; the underclass has reason to feel threatened by the exercise of aristocratic power. Tocqueville remains committed to an aristocratic ideal of liberty, but he sees virtues as well as vices in American democratic practice. He views the future as one of increasing equality and hopes for a productive tension between equality and liberty. Perhaps nowhere else is the Tocquevillian ideal of liberty better expressed than in Mill’s celebrated essay, “On Liberty.” Tocqueville and Mill provide an exemplary and lamentably rare instance of a convergence of philosophical outlooks.

It does not require a stretch of imagination to see its application to contemporary political reality. President Obama’s liberal constituency cannot abide his openness to ideas they find anathema; nor can they understand his persistence in knocking on a closed door that, it would seem, will never open to receive him. By showing his willingness to negotiate, he shows weakness in their view. Obama would argue in response that by demonstrating his willingness to negotiate he is showing up the absence of reciprocity on the other side. The party of No at a time of crisis when positive and bold action is required discredits itself in the long if not the short term. Democracy thrives on the intelligent and good faith exchange of ideas; compromise is often the medium through which progress is made. The refusal to make compromises is inimical to the democratic process. In times of crisis, actions that trump

compromise may be necessary, but they are not always achievable, given obstacles that may be put in their way: majority or supermajority rule, separation of powers etc. The voices that demand boldness when boldness is required should be heard, but even in times of crisis, the conciliatory voice that urges us to listen to other voices also have their place if something is to be accomplished. The conciliatory voice, however, must not betray conviction of what is, as Mill puts it, “essential” to what has to be done. Where Obama is lacking is not in his willingness to compromise, but in his failure at crucial moments to assert with consistency and force his conviction about what is *essential*.

“The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity.” Yeats’s famous lines in “The Second Coming” are a rebuke not only to mindless fanatics, but also to “the best,” that is, those who cannot summon up sufficient conviction to act when action is necessary. The perils of no conviction are obvious. The convictionless person can’t be counted on. He is a passive observer of events, hesitating, as he does, to commit himself to anything. Better than Yeats’s “best” is the capacity for acting from conviction without being overwhelmed by passionate intensity. At the same time, one needs to guard against being frozen in conviction in order to preserve the freedom to change one’s mind when events warrant it. The mixture of conviction and intellectual flexibility that Mill embodies is rare in intellectual life; it is rarer in political life. The reason is clear: what motivates political actors is the acquisition and retention of power. Nothing short of a revolution in our political culture would have to take place for politics to become the disinterested medium for the common good.

The concluding remarks of Mill’s essay on Coleridge bring to mind the philosopher Richard Rorty and his way of engaging perspectives different from his own. For him the “doing” of philosophy is a perpetual conversation with others without the expectation of achieving final truth, truth in an objective sense being an illusion. It would be a mistake, however, to attribute to Rorty a lack of conviction. On the contrary, Rorty’s perspectivism, or should I say perspective, has its own aggressive disposition in its ambition to redescribe the philosophies of others in his own terms. The Rortyan pragmatist may make a show of listening intently in his conversation with others, but his aim is the appropriation of what they have to say to his own agenda. Take his secularizing liberal impulse toward religious expression. “In its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which is enlightened, secular through and through. [Note *enlightened* here has its circumscribed eighteenth-century meaning, in effect denying enlightenment to believers.] It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no

room for the notion that there are non-human forces in which human beings should be responsible. It would drop or drastically reinterpret not only the idea of holiness but also [ideas] of ‘devotion to truth’ and of ‘fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit’” (5). What would the de-divinization of religious language mean? It would mean depriving those of religious inclination a language to express their spiritual aspirations. Reinterpretation or redescription, as Rorty puts it, means the conversion of religious language into poetic metaphor, dictating, as it were, the manner in which spiritual aspiration could be expressed or frustrated.

What would it mean to drop or drastically reinterpret “devotion to truth”? The idea of objective truth would go by the boards. Each person would simply affirm his or her own perspective as the *via media* to “truth,” always enclosed in inverted commas. Each person’s subjectivity is the “foundation” of truth for that person. There is no common ground outside the subjectivities of each person to resolve differences and conflicts. At best perspectives may converge or overlap, but subjectivity is insurmountable. It is not at all clear what would count as a persuasive argument in which one perceives “truth” in a different, perhaps adversary perspective. “Light from other minds,” according to Mill assumes a dialectic, a possible coming together of perspectives, a fruitful exchange of ideas in which understanding is advanced. Rorty’s strict perspectivism would seem to rule out the possibility of dialectic. Is it extravagant to view such an agenda as potentially tyrannical? Here is Rorty’s problem: by resisting the idea of objective truth, he opens himself up to a radical relativism that gives equal authority or rather lack of authority to truth claims from all sides, including his own. Yet he is a man of conviction, who wishes to redescribe and assimilate adversary views to his own agenda. What we have is a contradiction between theory and practice. In theory Rorty acknowledges the partiality of all perspectives, but locked in as he, like everyone, is in a particular perspective, conversation becomes not a meeting of minds but rather an occasion for appropriating and discounting what others have to say. In effect, Rorty in practice ignores the epistemological modesty of his theory. Mill does not suffer the contradiction, because he believes in objective truth at the same time he is aware that his own grasp of it may be partial and incomplete: hence his openness to other views.

“Light from other minds” assumes minds capable of emitting light. What happens when one or another side goes dark? Not all views contribute to the circle of truth. They may be wrong and deserve to be rejected outright. The capacity for listening to the voices of others is not merely an intellectual virtue; it is as well a political virtue. Cass Sunstein argues that “when a law is so inconsistent with people’s values that it cannot, in a democracy, be much enforced, it loses its legitimacy. It has no claim to regulate

conduct at all” (22). I cite this passage with regret, because it is strong argument against a law that I support: the health care reform act. The act received grudging support from only one party and united opposition from the opposing party, and now the attorneys general of a majority of states are seeking to declare it unconstitutional. Would the lack of consensus justify abandoning support for the law by those who believe in its necessity? What would Mill say? Mill believed, as did Tocqueville, that it is possible for a minority to possess the truth and for a majority to be tyrannical. Abandoning a view or a law because it has not achieved consensus does not follow from the need to listen to what others have to say. It does argue for strenuous and persuasive advocacy of the view and the law.

A party or an ideology may become frozen in ideas for which there is little empirical evidence; all criticisms of it are met with ritualistic counter assertions that are devoid of reason and fact. The other side may have a superior purchase on reality, but finds that it cannot get through to the adversary view. Patience and generosity, intellectual qualities to be prized, become difficult to sustain, and anger, acrimony and intolerance on both sides fill the air. There is no longer any genuine exchange of views, only statements and restatements of views in which no side has any influence on the other side. Instead of attending to the logic and evidence of views put forward, the targets of attack are motives, conscious and unconscious. The side with a superior grasp of reality suffers the most, for in its exasperated conviction of superiority it may also stop listening to views and arguments that arise from another source that may have something different and valuable to offer in understanding reality. I have named few names or parties, but anyone who has paid attention to contemporary political discourse and action should be able to supply many more.

Further Reading

- Asch, S. 1952. *Social psychology*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Himmelfarb, G. (Ed.). 1973. *John Stuart Mill: Essays on politics and culture*. Gloucester: Peter Smith.
- Mill, J. S. *Autobiography*. 1944 [1873]. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rawls, J. 1971. *A theory of justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schlesinger, A. 1949. *The vital center: The politics of freedom*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sunstein, C. 2009. *Going to extremes: How like minds united and divide*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Eugene Goodheart is Edytha Gross Professor of Humanities Emeritus at Brandeis University. He is the author of many books of literary and cultural criticism as well as a memoir, *Confessions of a Secular Jew*.